

PETER VAN BENSCHOTEN
February 10, 2000

Today is Thursday, February 10, 2000. Ann Townsend and myself, Anne Andeen, are interviewing Peter Van Benschoten, whose uncle William Van Benschoten, homesteaded the acreage which is now Mummy Mountain Estates I, II and III. Mr. Van Benschoten, may we have your permission to quote you in part or in all of this taped interview?

Peter: Absolutely.

Anne: Alright. Just for the record, I wonder if you would spell your last and his last for us.

Peter: My last name is V a n B e n s c h o t e n.

Anne: I'm wondering, are you a native Arizonan?

Peter: Not exactly. I came here to live in about 1957, because I had previously had been over in Paradise Valley at my uncle's place two or three times.

Anne: Did you at any time live in the Town of Paradise Valley after it was incorporated or before?

Peter: I lived in Scottsdale in 1959 and up until three years ago, I owned a home on the side of Camelback on Solano, for about 12 years. Now I live in Scottsdale at a different address.

Anne: Can you tell us about William Van Benschoten and how he came to acquire this property originally? Maybe you can give us some background about his brothers.

Peter: My uncle's wife had tuberculosis and my uncle also had a home on the Hudson River. Because of the tuberculosis, he came to Paradise Valley, I don't know why, but he did. This was for his wife's health.

Ann: What year was that about?

Peter: I don't know, but it was a long time ago.

Ann: Back in the 20's maybe?

Peter: Probably in the 20's. She died fairly soon after that but the two of them had three children together. William, named after my uncle, Richard and Katrina. They are the children that lived with my uncle.

Anne: They lived at the home at the end of what is now Cave Creek?

Peter: Yes. After he died, I don't know how long that was, but he had remarried to a lady named Grace. There were no more children, but the children grew up in this spot out here in Paradise Valley. I don't know if they went to Judson School, but they graduated from the high school in Scottsdale.

Dick: They probably went down to Kiva in Scottsdale.

Peter: Yeah. One of them at least used to ride their horse from school to home, back and forth. My uncle was quite a jolly person. He has been a newspaper man in I think Detroit. My father was born in Detroit and I think that's where they both started. He had a lot of friends out here. He collected these Indian artifacts. Over the years, he gave me many displays which have been lost in the moving, and so forth. He had quite a wonderful time in Paradise Valley. He was quite close to my Dad for many years, but then things changed and we didn't see my uncle as much. The last time I saw him was about 1965, or something like that.

Ann: How many acres did he buy over here on the east side of Mummy?

Peter: He got a section of land and because of the rules and laws that if you improved that, you could get another section. So he had two sections.

Anne: There's 640 acres in a section.

Dick: Times two. That's 1280 acres.

Peter: My uncle's caretaker took care of me in the 1940's, about 1944. I came over and spent some time. The caretaker showed me around, and it was the whole inside of Mummy Mountain, way up towards the top. I hunted jackrabbits in there for about three weeks. I shot a lot of jackrabbits. Then the buzzards came in after I left, according to the caretaker. My uncle was in fairly good health, but I just didn't see him too much. He would go back to New York State in the summer time.

Anne: He didn't do any ranching on the property because I know he had a bunkhouse area behind the regular house.

Peter: Yeah, that's where I stayed. By ranching, do you mean planting?

Anne: Or cattle, or anything?

Peter: Not that I know of did he have any cattle.

Dick: It was really more of a winter home for him and his family.

Peter: Yeah, that's right. That's true, and then of course, the three children went to school out here.

Dick: It was really more permanent.

Peter: I don't know how many summers they spent out here, but that's all I can tell you.

Anne: Did he build the house himself or did he have it built?

Peter: I can't say for sure. I know it had a copper roof on it and it was very plain. It had some nice Indian things that people would just love to have now. The baskets and all those things. He had several Indian friends that were old timers. Then he was a friend of Cheney. Mr. Cheney was an agent of Mr. McCormick. I think McCormick sent him out here to buy all this property. Mr. Cheney needed some spots to get water and my uncle made a pretty good arrangement with him.

Anne: I didn't know about that. Tell us more about that.

Peter: That's all I can tell you. Mr. Cheney needed to access the water, and my uncle provided that for him.

Anne: It was on his property?

Ann: He had a well?

Peter: Yeah, there was a well on the property. Mr. Cheney needed the water and I know there was an arrangement made.

Dick: Cheney operated the water company.

Peter: Yeah, he later had the water company. I met him a couple of times, but I haven't seen him. I just lost track of him. There were some interesting stories. Do you want to hear them?

Ann: Yes, we'd love to hear them.

Peter: Mr. Cheney's wife apparently ran away on horseback. Then things changed and I think new people came in, and a new wife later on. But that was I think a fact because I heard from my dad, and my dad was very factual. He didn't make up stories.

Anne: Was this a first or second wife? There was an Evelyn Cheney as I recall.

Peter: My guess is the first. You might have learned later he married another wife. Cheney was an agent for Mr. McCormick to buy a lot of properties.

Anne: Do you know how long your uncle had that property?

Peter: Last time I saw him was very close to when he died. He used to come to Knoxville to see us. My dad had a steel company in Knoxville, Tennessee. My uncle was a director of that company and he used to come and visit us. I don't know if he was married then or not. As I mentioned before his first wife died of tuberculosis. How long he lived there -- last time I saw him there was 1960, I think.

Anne: Do you know how and when he and Charlie Mieg became acquainted?

Peter: No, I don't. I wish I had asked my dad that but he's been long gone. The daughter may be living and I may be able to track her down. I have to refresh some of my memory and think about that. Katrina, the daughter, married a man who I think was a ship builder from Connecticut. Then, for some reason, they moved to New Mexico, and he was in a building business -- not the construction of homes, but something else. I talked to him way back but I don't remember. I should have thought about all this stuff, but I have other things on my mind.

Anne: Do you know anything about the business arrangement?

Peter: Well my parents said it was done on a shoestring. So, that's all I know. My dad and uncle were brothers and very close, but I think the family kind of split up.

Ann: The greed?

Peter: Yeah, I think that split up the children and my dad. Then, of course, William, who was my uncle's number one son, died in an accident in New York State. He was going to somebody's funeral and he got hit by a car on the freeway. As you

probably know, the family came from Poughkeepsie and West Park on the Hudson River. The little guys were on the West Park and the big guys were in Poughkeepsie. There are some second cousins that live on the Poughkeepsie side, big guys. One of them was a Chrysler dealer, the oldest Chrysler dealer in New York State. They were very nice. I met them one time. The house was beautiful. It was three down from West Point. This was my uncle's house. They at one time grew very good grapes.

Ann: Beautiful country there. I've been up in that area.

Anne: It would be interesting to know what 1200 and some acres went for in the 1920's.

Ann: Have you any idea what a section of land sold back in the 20's?

Peter: I've no idea, it was pretty cheap.

Anne: I'm sure it was, particularly being mountain because nobody valued the mountain property.

Peter: Your dad was nice to me. It was your dad?

Anne: Uncle.

Peter: He was nice to me and I met him when I came out here. When I graduated from the University of Arizona, I got into the brokerage business with Putnam in downtown Los Angeles. I didn't like that very much because I didn't like Los Angeles, so I moved over the same company to Phoenix. That was about 1956 or '57. I met your uncle and he was a very nice guy. I liked him.

Dick: I pulled out of the file the section which was a subdivision of Mummy Mountain Park. I was looking for dates. It was recorded in 1953. So in '53 is when properties, I assume, were subdivided.

Peter: That's pretty late.

Dick: Yeah, 1953.

Ann: Anne, now your Uncle Charlie Mieg bought several acres from his uncle?

Dick: No, he bought 1280 acres.

Ann: Oh, I see, Charlie bought all of the property.

Dick: I suspect they left the Van Benschoten house and some property around it because he continued to live there.

Peter: My guess is that he sold some for that amount of money, and then the other was done on a shoestring. That's where it comes in with what my dad told me. He sold off the other property.

Dick: It was a lot better 25 years ago than now. Anne and I had a chance to be in their house. It had been remodeled by an architect. But you could still see how it was - - a big dining room, large kitchen -- typical of what you think of as a "ranch" type.

Peter: Not beautiful but pretty functional.

Dick: It was very nice.

Ann: Was it built of adobe, do you know?

Peter: It had a copper roof, I'm pretty sure about that.

Anne: There was a lot of stain in the design, I'm pretty sure about that. And then it burned at one time.

Peter: That's right. Then how it was built back, I don't know. I wasn't curious about that at the time. If you can think of any other questions, I might dig something out of my memory.

Ann: Anne, I was going to ask you if you had any idea how much your uncle, Charlie Mieg, bought the land from Mr. Van Benschoten?

Anne: The story we heard is that he paid \$12,000.

Peter: That was the story that was in the paper.

Ann: For how much land?

Anne: For the entire inner basin of the mountain. He put down \$5,000 and borrowed \$8,000 from my grandmother. As I understand it, he and Mr. Van Benschoten, your uncle, had some kind of understanding, or gentleman's agreement...

Dick: It was a legal agreement to establish the trust, so that even though the initial price might have been very modest, whenever a piece of property was subsequently sold by Uncle Mieg, a portion of that sales price went into the Van Benschoten Trust. It was a way of letting them participate in the increase in value of the property.

Peter: That makes sense.

Dick: It was quite unusual in those days, but I've seen things like that used more recently now. It had to go through all kinds of sub-things, battling with the IRS to hold up, but apparently that was quite an imaginative deal they had.

Peter: That makes sense. That ties in with the things that I have in my memory.

Ann: It was a very interesting way for Mr. Van Benschoten to continue to recoup the money.

Peter: He was not a real what we call today a "business man." He was a very wonderful, kind-hearted guy. I don't think he really cared.

Ann: Money wasn't that important to him.

Anne: He may not have understood the value of what he had either.

Ann: I don't think anybody did at that time.

Anne: Except my uncle.

Dick: When we moved out there in 1960 everybody laughed at us. They thought that we were crazy.

Anne: They called us "Dick's Desert".

Peter: You lived right there?

Ann: They still do, yes.

Peter: That's your home now?

Ann: It's a beautiful home.

Anne: Uncle Manny sold us the property.

Peter: I'd like to see that sometime.

Anne/Dick: You're welcome to come visit us.

Dick: It sounds like your uncle didn't have to work? Where did his income come from?

Peter: Well, let's see. My dad worked very hard in that company, the steel company. That paid dividends through the Depression. I don't know. It might come back to me and I can tell you later.

Dick: So their father was involved in the steel company, is that it?

Peter: They owned stock in it. My dad was the president and chief executive officer, and then my uncle was a director. That paid out and was liquidated about 1941 or '42.

Dick: What was the name of the steel company, do you remember?

Peter: Knoxville Iron Company.

Dick: In Poughkeepsie?

Peter: No, in Knoxville, Tennessee. That's where I was born.

Anne: You would think that it was very adventuresome for William to come out here all the way from back east and decide on Phoenix.

Peter: My guess is that it was well known because of tuberculosis.

Anne: Yes, the dry desert air. But I mean to pick up those sections of property and live so far from Phoenix.

Ann: Yes, I just read that the road Bethany Home is really named for a tubercular hospital that used to be there. The hospital no longer exists, but the street maintained that name. So he really had established a home for himself and his wife far away from the Bethany Home area.

Peter: Yes.

Anne: Even to travel out here from Phoenix.

Ann: Oh yeah, there wasn't any roads that early.

Peter: It's too bad I didn't ask questions of my dad because those things could have been answered quickly. I just can't remember any other conversation.

Ann: You had no way of knowing we'd be asking you these questions.

Peter: Well, my dad came out here quite a bit way back.

Dick: If you're not in a big hurry tonight, you can stop by and see our house.

Peter: Well, I can't tonight, but I certainly would like to another time.

Anne: I have your phone number. Let us thank you very much for participating. It's been a pleasure to meet you.

Peter: I am very happy to add something.

Anne: I don't think I mentioned this in our introduction, but Dick Andeen was also here interviewing Mr. Van Benschoten.

Ann: Thank you.

Anne: Again, thank you very much.